Field description of the Obbia Lark Calandrella obbiensis, its breeding and distribution

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The Obbia Lark Calandrella obbiensis was described by Witherby (1905: 514) from a single specimen collected at Obbia (05°21'N, 48°32'E), on the east coast of northern Somalia, on 12 January 1903. White (1961) mentions that it is also known from Mogadishu (02°03'N, 45°21'E), but I have been unable to trace the original reference (possibly White received the information in litt. from Moltoni, since many of the Italian specimens and data were destroyed during the war). It was next recorded when a male and female were collected on 15 and 16 September 1962 at Uarsciek (02°18'N, 45°47'E) (Roche 1966). Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1960: 44) give a brief and poor description of the bird, and state that there is no information for habits, nest and eggs, breeding or calls; curiously, they include a distribution map based apparently on the one known specimen indicating a rather extensive range in coastal and inland northeastern Somalia (as in the case of White above, they may have received further unpublished information from Moltoni). Neither the description of the bird nor the coloured plate aid in its identification, but an adequate description is given in Witherby (op. cit.). Some of the missing information is now available and is presented here.

When I arrived in Somalia in August 1978, I was at once puzzled over the identification of a small lark, unquestionably the most numerous passerine present on the coastal dunes round Mogadishu. The only literature available was Mackworth-Praed & Grant (op. cit.), and this proved to be unhelpful, although the possibility of these birds being Obbia Larks was not dismissed. I circulated a description among friends who might be able to help, which resulted in P. R. Colston at the British Museum commenting that my description, after it had been compared with the type specimen of *C. obbiensis*, "was better than that in Mackworth-Praed & Grant". The type, incidentally, is in poor condition.

Distribution

During 1978–1980 I travelled widely in Somalia and examined many stretches of the coastline. Obbia Larks are confined to a very narrow coastal strip in the southern part of their range (Fig. 1), from 30 km south of Mogadishu at Hal Hambo (01°54'N, 45°05'E), to 03°17'N, 46°50'E at 74 km north of Adale (02°45'N, 46°19'E). At this point on a journey with J. E. Miskell we were obliged to turn back because of soft sand and follow an inland route. No more Obbia Larks were seen for 2 days until we were 4 km east of Harardere (04°38'N, 47°52'E), where we saw several at 16 km inland. From here onwards as we approached the coast again they became very common all the way to Obbia; beyond Obbia we turned inland and saw no more of them. Almost certainly their distribution is continuous along the 170 km of coast we missed. From my interpretation of the maps the habitat would seem to be unsuitable to the north of Obbia, and we saw no trace of the species at other points on the coast visited in the next few days, including Eil (07°59'N, 49°48'E), Hafun Bay (10°25'N, 51°10'E) and Tohen (11°44'N, 51°15'E).

Elsewhere in the country no Obbia Larks were seen in coastal areas from



Fig. 1. Distribution of the Obbia Lark *Calandrella obbiensis* in Somalia. The crosses indicate areas where the species has been recorded; the broken line indicates the route followed on a journey in 1980. Map drawn by Alain Peeters.

The distribution of the Obbia Lark thus can be described as occupying a narrow coastal belt 570 km long from Obbia in the north to just south of Mogadishu; in the north it extends up to 16 km inland, but in the south not much more than 1 km. The total area inhabited by the species cannot be more than 1500 km², and is probably nearer to 1200 km². However, mostly it is abundant where it occurs and there is no reason to believe that it is endangered in any way.

Field Description

A small short-tailed lark, c. 12 cm long, whole of upperparts brown, streaked with darker shades of brown; a pale patch just above bill (not present in all birds); a distinct whitish supercilium extending in front of and behind

eye, but not always reaching the bill, sometimes divided vertically to form two equal halves; dark line through eye; a double moustachial streak on each side; throat white; rest of underparts whitish heavily streaked in almost regular lines to lower breast and on flanks; tail with central feathers as mantle, contrasting with the remainder which are uniformly dark brown, sometimes showing a trace of white along the outer feather; bill fairly stout, dark above and yellowish below; legs pink.

Breeding

Six nests were found in 1979 and evidence obtained for breeding in several other pairs observed. The eggs collected are being deposited in the Smithsonian Institution.

- a. 14 km north of Uarsciek, 8 June, building; 2 eggs on 15 June were collected.
- b. 41 km north of Uarsciek, 8 June, nest with 1 addled egg and one almost fully fledged pullus, which left the nest on being investigated.
- c. 17 km north of Uarsciek, 15 June, 2 eggs.
- d. 15 km north of Mogadishu, 17 June, 2 erythristic eggs; on 21 June it had been trampled by goats.
- e. Gezira (01°57'N, 45°11'E), 11 July, 1 addled egg and a newly hatched pullus; the chick was there on 16 July, but the nest was empty on 21 July.
- f. Gezira, 12 July, 3 pulli ready to leave the nest.

In addition, a near fully-fledged pullus together with 2 Anthus melindae pulli were found in a regurgitated bolus from an unidentified predator, possibly a jackal, on 8 June, and adults of 3 pairs were seen collecting food on 28 and 29 June and 14 July. Clutch size was probably 2 in 5 nests, although two of these may not have been complete, and 3 in another, with eggs laid in May and June and possibly July. Further breeding might occur in November-December in some years of good rain, and there is some support for this from the 5 males collected December-February showing testicular development (Table 1).

TABE 1

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	Mensural data on 6 Obbia Larks Calanarella obbiensis					
Collection No.	Sex	Locality	Date	Wing	Weight	Gonads
178	8	Gezira	14.xii.78	67	15.3	4
186	0	Mallable	14.xii.78	71	14.7	_
298†	ð	Gezira	8.i.79	70	15.2	1.5
299†	ð	Gezira	8.i.79	70	15.6	1.5
348*	Ŷ	Mallable	16.ii.79	66	12.3	< 1
349	ð	Mallable	16.ii.79	70	14.0	3
350	ð	Mallable	16.ii.79	70	13.7	3

Notes. $\dagger = \text{Tarsi}$ dull flesh, * = Tarsi pale brown and Iris brown. Wing-length in mm, weight in g, largest diameter of testis or ova in mm. o = unsexed.

Nest sites. The sites of nests a-c were similar—on the southeast side of a thin plant (offering very little shade) on dunes with sparse vegetation, 2 at 40 m and one at 150 m inland above high tide line. In *a* the plant was a *Lithospermum* sp, in *b* a species of grass and in *c* a low rush *Juncus* sp. In *d* the nest was built in a scrape below a thin cover of *Zygophyllum simplex*, making it almost invisible from above, within 20 m of the spray zone above a low sea cliff. Nest *e* was completely exposed, with a very light growth of a legume

to the south and west (possibly grazed off) and offering no shade; it was on dunes 50 m from the high tide line. Nest f was in very sparse cover of a grass *Dactyloctenium aegyptiacum*, a sedge *Cyperus* sp. and a legume *Indigophora* sp., but the nest was completely covered with strands of the creeping *Indigophora*; it was on dunes 500 m from the high tide line.

Nests. Nest a was built into a deep cup-shaped depression in the sand, a rather substantial nest of thin dry rootlets, pieces of withered vegetation, some woolly Aerva seeds and dead marine Cymodocea leaves, and 19 pieces of thick white string varying from 6.5 to 17.5 cm in length, to the extraordinary total of 195.5 cm. Internal diameter 50 mm, external diameter 90 mm, internal depth of cup 50 mm, so that the eggs were actually below ground level. Nest b was a shallow saucer-shaped depression, very sparsely lined with a few strands of dry grass. Nest c was a slightly wider and flatter cup-shaped nest than a, similarly placed in an excavated depression in the sand, entirely made of dry rootlets and a few dead Cymodocea leaves. Internal diameter 55 mm, external diameter 85 mm, internal depth of cup 30 mm. Nest d had an internal diameter of 60 mm, external diameter 85 mm and internal depth 40 mm. Nest e had an internal diameter of 50 mm, external diameter 80 mm and internal depth 35 mm. Thus the 4 measured nests had internal diameters of 50-60 mm, external diameters of 80-90 mm and internal cup depths of 30-50 mm.

Eggs. In nest a, one egg was a uniform oval without a broader end, 19.2 x 13.0 mm, creamy white freckled with brown and grey, more so for one third of one end, where 10% of the ground colour was visible; the second was much more sparesly freckled and blunt pyriform in shape, 18.6 x 13.2 mm. In nest b, the egg was similar in shape to the first described from a, but entirely different in colour, having a greyish-white ground, finely and uniformly speckled all over with grey and brown and having a few larger freckles at one end, and a few faint grey hairlines, 18.1 x 13.8 mm. In nest c, one egg was similar in shape to the first from nest a, but had an off-white ground colour closely and uniformly speckled with brown, 17.9 x 13.9 mm; the second was slightly rounder, with only half as many dark markings composing larger freckles, many of which were concentrated in a ring one third of the egg's length from one end, 18.0 x 14.0 mm. In nest d, the eggs were erythristic, but were destroyed before they could be measured or described in detail. In nest e, the addled egg measured 17.5 x 13.1 mm, and had a creamy ground colour, speckled all over with light brown, with a few larger freckles, and a denser band at the slightly broader end. The 6 eggs from 4 nests are thus variable in colour and size, averaging 18.2 x 13.5 mm.

Behaviour and Habitat

The Obbia Lark is very common in pairs and small parties in its preferred habitat throughout the year. Restless and very active, seldom staying to feed in one place before flying off, often high in the air for 100 m or more to another similar site. Parties of sometimes up to 30 birds are frequent, even in the breeding season, but just what is the status of these birds is not known. When feeding they often adopt a rather hunched attitude and then look remarkably finch- or *Serinus*-like. They also run about actively and clamber nimbly *over* low vegetation, rather than through or under it. Some birds are easily approachable, but others are "wild" and fly away at even distant approach. In the strong monsoon winds, they are difficult to observe in open terrain, where there is low-level driven sand and bright sunlight.

The habitat is sand dunes close to the sea, and rolling plains, with patches of low, usually heavily grazed, halophytic scrub and herbaceous growth.

The following ground-nesting species breed in the same area where Obbia Larks have been observed, but not all occur throughout its range:- Crowned Lapwing Vanellus coronatus, Kittlitz's Sand Plover Charadrius pecuarius, Creamcoloured Courser Cursorius cursor, Little Tern Sterna albifrons, Red-winged Bush Lark Mirafra hypermetra, Somali Long-billed Lark M. somalica, Lesser Hoopoe Lark Alaemon hamertoni, Short-crested Lark Galerida theklae, Whitefronted Sparrowlark Eremopterix nigriceps and Malindi Pipit Anthus melindae. No contact has been observed between Obbia Larks and any of these species.

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The first evidence of Demoiselle Crane Anthropoides virgo and Pygmy Cormorant Phalacrocorax pygmaeus in Britain.

by Graham S. Cowles Recieved 4 March 1981

Climatic and environmental change both influence the geographical distribution of avifaunas. Recently, the Demoiselle Crane Anthropoides virgo and Pygmy Cormorant Phalacrocorax pygmaeus, 2 steppe species not previously known from the British Isles, have been identified from bones excavated at 2 quite unrelated sites, one Pleistocene and one late Middle Age. The discovered remains may be representative of either resident or migrant populations now lost to Britain due to changes in climate or habitat. Alternatively, but much less probably, this may only be fortuitous evidence of 2 individual stragglers which once visited England.

ANTHROPOIDES VIRGO Demoiselle Crane

While undertaking the re-examination of avian bones in the A. L. Armstrong (1924-35) collection, excavated from Pin Hole Cave, Creswell Crags, Derbyshire, Mr. R. D. S. Jenkinson requested that a premaxilla be identified for him at the British Museum (Nat. Hist.), Tring. After comparison with material in the osteological collection, I have no doubt that this tip of the